



VICTORIAN ROMANCE

*An ill*  
WIND

NELL HARTE

An Ill Wind

**NELL HARTE**

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*Disclaimer*

*The Voyage*

*PREVIEW*

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*The Voyage*

*PREVIEW*

**TITLE**

# The Voyage

Jonathan Martin staggered along the gangway of the *Rising Sun*, clutching at his stomach. Jagged spears of pain had lodged in his innards, though he refused to prevent them from leaving the ship. Not now, so close to home. Besides, he knew there would be an innocent explanation for it—rancid meat from last night's dinner, or fouled water from the barrels, wreaking havoc upon him. It was nothing he had not endured a thousand times before. And, soon, he would have his wife to nurse him back to health, in his own bed, in his own house, with his beloved at his side. The ship had docked in Sunderland but a week ago, before sailing along the coast towards Newcastle.

*Home, at last...* He paused beside a wooden post as nausea rose up his throat. Turning his head, he bent double and expelled the contents of his stomach into the gently swaying water that swept against the wharf. He heard the splash and cringed as a voice called out.

"Too much grog last night, Martin?" A friend of his, Mark Flack, strolled down the gangway and slapped him on the back.

Jonathan's head swam, but he managed to muster a sickly grin. "Not so much as a drop, mate."

"Aye, and if you expect me to believe that, I must be green behind the ears. I bet you were celebrating seeing that fine wife of yours again, eh?" Mark smirked. "Is she coming to meet you off the boat?"

Jonathan shook his head, swallowing another swell of nausea. "We docked early, so she won't know I'm here. Thought I'd surprise her."

"Well, get all of that out before you do, eh." Mark peered over the edge of the wharf and pulled a funny face. "Last thing she'll want is to clean up your sick. Women want romance, Martin, not patients."

"I just ate a bad bit of meat is all," Jonathan assured, standing back up



to his full height. Cramps clenched at his belly, but he hid it well, not wanting another round of teasing from his friend. "And I should be getting on. Enjoy your leave, and I'll see you on the next one."

Mark yanked him in for a rough hug, almost igniting another expulsion. "Aye, I'm going to spend all this well-earned coin on a lass of me own." He chuckled brashly as he let Jonathan go, and carried on his merry stroll along the quayside.

*Get your head straight, lad*, Jonathan chastised himself. Keeping one hand pressed to his tender abdomen, he pushed away from the wooden post and blended into the mayhem of the quayside. Fishwives hawked their wares, their hands covered in the glitter of fish scales, shrieking in his ears as he passed. Workers ran up and down the gangways to haul the cargo onto the quays, yelling instructions until Jonathan's skull pounded. Grubby children squatted in the shadows, holding out their hands for a coin, their fingers so dirty they looked almost black. Prostitutes swaggered up and down in worn dresses with plunging necklines, waving at the sailors who had just disembarked, hoping to get a slice of some of that well-earned coin that Mark had spoken about. Jonathan ignored them all as he weaved through the chaos, his boots splashing in the salty pools that gathered on the wooden planks of the wharf.

He paused every time his stomach lurched uncomfortably. Sometimes, he expelled more. Sometimes, it proved to be a false alarm. Still, he would not be deterred. The sickness had started in the early hours of this morning, and had yet to relent, but he knew they soon would. He just wished he had something in his stomach, for it felt hollow and painful, and every time he retched, nothing but yellow bile emerged.

Eventually, he reached the perimeter of the grey, crowded terraces where he and his wife lived. They were fortunate enough to be able to afford the ground floor to themselves, though many were not so lucky. On the floor above, eight men shared a room, while six women shared a room on the other side of the landing. An endless carousel of noise and debauchery, though he and his beloved, Nellie, had grown used to the sounds.

"Jonny, is that you?" A gnarled old woman, ironically named Mrs. Darling, puffed on a pipe, around the corner of his street. She leaned up

against the filthy wall, though her craggy face was just as dirty. With one water pump to serve an entire neighbourhood, and lengthy queues for a turn, it got used sparingly.

Jonathan tipped his hat to her. "Aye, just got back. Is Nellie home?"

"Should be, aye." Mrs. Darling coughed violently, and spat the result onto the foul ground. "She were round at Mary Clarkson's all night, helping the lass deliver her eighth. Don't know if it lived or not. Guess it don't matter, when it's the eighth." She gave a harsh cackle that angered Jonathan.

*Of course it matters.* He did not say so aloud, for he did not wish to enter into a confrontation, mere minutes from his door.

"Right, well, I'll be off," he said brusquely.

"You don't look so bright yourself, lad. Don't tell me you got a bit of that seasickness, after all your years on ships?" Mrs. Darling flashed a gummy grin.

He forced a smile. "A bit of bad meat, but I'll be right as rain when I see my Nellie."

"Aye, don't let an old crone like me keep you from that beauty." Mrs. Darling waved him away, and he duly hurried the rest of the way to his front door. He let himself in, knowing the door would be open. Nellie always kept the door open, in case anyone needed her.

He managed to stumble into the kitchen, where a fire roared in the grate, before his knees gave in. They buckled, sending him crashing to the floor. Lying there on the cold stone, with unconsciousness encroaching, tears filled his eyes, though he knew he could ill-afford to lose any more water from his body. The sickness had already robbed him of most of it. His skin sagged away from his bones and what little muscle he had left, his flesh pale and loose, and his lips parched until they felt like two slices of dried apricot.

*But I made it home... I made it home to you, my Nellie.* Darkness slid over his eyelids, and, for a second, he feared he would not see the light of day again.

"Jonny?" Warm hands held his face. "Jonny, can you hear me?"

His eyelids creaked back open, defying the odds. "Nellie?" Eyes bluer than the ocean on a clear, still day peered at him through his fever dream,

and he smelled scent of lavender. A perfume she made herself, saving a few coins a month to purchase the flower from the market, and mixing it with the rosehip oil that she painstakingly pressed with her own two hands.

She leaned closer, smiling with obvious relief. "Yes, love. I'm here, though you gave me a nasty fright, out cold on the floor like that. You weren't drinking, were you?" Wringing a cloth in cold water, she dabbed it across his forehead and down his neck, washing away the rancid sweat. It felt wonderful to his dry, sallow flesh, as though some life were being coaxed back in.

"I weren't drinking, love. I've a bit of sickness, is all. But there's nowt your hands can't fix." She could make a feast out of turnip heads, carrot stalks, and gristle with a few stringy whispers of meat clinging on for dear life. She could darn holes in a pair of trousers until they looked brand new and chase away the sorrows of just about anyone with a few hours of her time, and her gentle voice. She could fix a fever with a steeped cup of her signature medicine, which she drank diluted each day because she liked the taste: a blend of yarrow, elderberry, and rosemary which she begged and borrowed, though she grew her own rosemary in a box on the windowsill. He could almost smell that familiar scent, too, if he concentrated hard enough.

She nodded uncertainly. "I'll do everything I can, love. Everything."

"I'm really here, ain't I, Nellie?" he rasped, as her blue eyes faded in and out of focus. He no longer knew what was real and what was not, delirium overwhelming him in a sudden grip. Her face focused once more, glowing angelically in the firelight. If she just kept holding him, and trailing that cloth over his face... if she just urged him to live, he felt sure he could fight off the dark entity that hovered outside his door, waiting for the moment to carry him away.

In truth, though he did not want to admit it, he sensed there was more to this than fouled meat. He had heard tell of a terrible affliction when they docked in Sunderland. Of the twenty men aboard their neighbouring ship, six had already succumbed to the angel of death that spread her shadowed wings across the vessel, on their return from Riga. A place that Jonathan and his crew had also returned from. According to the surviving

sailors, the victims of this mysterious illness had been read their last rites during the voyage, before they had been tossed overboard, everyone petrified that their ailment could spread on the wind or in the foetid air below decks.

She frowned in confusion. "Of course you're here. You came home to me, and you're in your kitchen, by the fire, where we're going to chase this fever away."

"My beautiful Li—" His words evaporated as a stabbing pain sliced through his gut. He clutched desperately at his abdomen and buried his face in the blanket that Nellie had lain across him. Agony snarled up his innards, from naval to nose, and he felt the rise of the sickness in his throat. Leaning over, he retched onto the stone floor until his eyes bulged and his throat felt as though the entire thing might expel itself. With nothing left in his stomach, flecks of blood splattered the viscous yellow residue.

Nellie pulled him up into her arms, rubbing his back frantically. "Jonny? Jonny, stay with me."

His stomach wrenched and wrenched to purge the affliction, but it proved a futile endeavour. As futile as his hope for survival. He had already begun to understand that he could not rid himself of this.

"What's wrong, love?" Nellie pleaded, laying him back down on the ground. "Have you been like this a while? You look so pale and thin, Jonny."

He dragged the blanket back over his shivering body and stared up at the beams overhead. The wood was threaded with veins of black mould, where the saltwater from the nearby quayside had drifted in on the wind and seeped in. It had warped the planks, rotting it from the inside out.

*Is that what's happening to me?*

"Jonny?" Nellie's voice sounded so faraway, the familiarity of his home transforming into a hazy world he did not quite recognise.

He squinted for a better look. "Who's there?"

"Don't you recognise my voice, Jonny?" A shadowy figure leaned closer, but he could not make out her beloved face.

"L-Nellie? Tell me it's you, Nellie. Tell me this ain't a d-dream. Tell me I made it b-back," he stammered, willing her to come back into focus. As the

edges of her solidified slightly, he took a relieved breath. Her ocean eyes glittered with unspent tears, and her long, honey-coloured hair was tied away from her face with the blue ribbon that he had bought her before he disembarked, the last time he had seen her.

Her lips curved upwards in a sad smile. "You're here, love. I'm here. Did you forget? Is it the fever?"

"I'd sooner die than forget a single thing about you," he replied, realising the bitter irony in the sentiment.

"Don't talk like that." She glanced down and the smile disappeared. He would have done anything to coax it back onto her lips. "Tell me the truth, Jonny. How long have you been sick?"

He tried to sit up, but weakness kept him down. "Not long, love. But... I think it's bad."

"How bad?" Her breath hitched.

"I don't know, love. Really bad. I think there were folks in Sunderland who died from it. A sickness from the Baltics." He strained for air, his stomach stabbing with agony.

She shook her head, holding his face in desperation. "Oh, Jonny... why did you have to go away again?"

"I wanted to take care of us, Nellie." A lump formed in his throat. "I were goin' to surprise you when I got back, tell you I'd been offered a bit of work on the wharfs, so you wouldn't have to worry about me bein' away all the time. I know it's what you been wantin'."

"One more voyage?" Tears trickled down her rosy cheeks.

He nodded and tried to sit up again. She enveloped him in her arms, clutching him with every fibre of her being. As much a part of him as his own flesh.

"If I'd known that one more meant this, I'd have begged you to stay," she whispered, lifting his hands to her lips and kissing them softly. "I'd have stood on the gangplank and stopped you getting on-board. I'd have dragged you back home with me bare hands, until the ship set sail without you."

He laughed until the pain in his stomach made him cough. He tasted blood in his mouth, and felt it leak out of the corner of his lips, meandering down his chin until it splashed onto the filthy mattress. The

crimson dot spread out, spiderwebbing through the fabric like red ink spilled by accident.

“No... this can’t be happening.” She conjured a handkerchief out of nowhere and dabbed it to his mouth.

He waited for the cough to subside. “I’m sorry, love.”

“Does it hurt?” she asked hesitantly, as though she did not want to hear the answer.

“It’s nowt I cannit handle,” he insisted. But he had never been able to lie to her. When they were wed, he had promised to always be true to her, and he had never broken that vow.

Her head bent forward, her shoulders shaking with grief. “You look so pale, love. If I had me herbs with me, I could brew you up something to help, but I used so many on Mary last night. I’ve none left. Maybe I could run into town and fetch some.”

“I don’t know that it’d help, love. I know I said you could, but I don’t think this can be fixed, even if you tried,” he confessed. Throughout his time at sea, he had faced his own mortality countless times. When waves towered twice as high as the ship and lashed the decks with a vehement fury, dragging souls down to the depths, like a Kraken’s tentacles coming to steal away those who dared enter its territory. When he had caught himself in rigging, or slipped from a height, only to save his skin with quick wits and sharp reflexes. When he had faced angry merchants and traders who led with pistols first and negotiations second. Not once had he feared he might actually lose his life, but now... he lay terrified.

“Ten years with you isn’t enough.” Tears squeezed out of his drained eyes. “I want ten more. Twenty more. A hundred more.”

She kissed his hands more urgently. “I want that, too. I want us to keep tryin’ for that family I know we’re meant to have.”

“Even without children, I’d not want anyone else. I’d live with you ‘til I were grey and old, and I’d be happy with that.” He wished he had more strength, so he might hold her close in his arms. All of their married life, they had prayed for children, but they had not yet been blessed. Now, he supposed it would never come to pass.

“I love you.” She leaned forward and kissed him on his parched, sore lips.

He struggled to kiss her back, ignoring the pain. "Not nearly so much as I love you. You've made me the luckiest lad in all the world, Nellie. And I'm only sorry that I can't..." He trailed off, tasting the salt of his tears in his mouth.

"Please, love, don't you leave me. I can't do this without you. Please..." She gazed into his eyes, her own shining with bitter sadness.

He shook his head, sobs wracking his chest. "My sweet Nellie, I don't think I can stay. I think I knew that when I left the ship, but I didn't want to give up until I was home. I had to see you again, one last time."

"At least we're together. At least I'm with you. Maybe you'll get better. Maybe it won't get you. Maybe, because you made it home, you'll be all right." She reached out and pulled him to her, cradling his sweat-soaked head to her chest. Her lips kissed his hair and his forehead and his cheeks and his mouth and his eyelids, oblivious to his fever and the stench of his deterioration. And he clung onto her with all the might he had left.

He buried his face in her shoulder, inhaling that heady scent of lavender. "I'm weak, Nellie."

"No." She whispered stubbornly. "No. You'll rest, and you'll feel better, and you'll be well again."

"It's too late, love," he replied, soaking the fabric of her dress with his hopeless tears. "I'm scared, Nellie. I don't know what's coming, and I don't want to go there without you. But... I think I have to." He hugged her as tight as his emaciated arms would allow.

She stroked his damp hair and hushed him softly, though he heard the abject grief in her voice. "You don't have to be scared. There's naught to be afraid of, love. Where you're going, there won't be no pain no more. And, if you... can't stay here, then you can wait for me there, 'til me days are done, and I can come back to you. And I'll smother you in more kisses than you'll know what to do with."

He laughed, triggering a cough that sent him spluttering off to the side. His heart raced wildly as he heaved onto the ground again, a strange, numb sensation spreading through his body. All the while, he felt Nellie's hand stroking his back in slow circles, until the retching eased, and he lolled in her embrace. There, entirely spent, he fixed his gaze on her as the cold ooze slithered through his veins, making his breath come in raspy

snatches, and his heart slow until he no longer felt its steady beat.

“I... love you,” he whispered.

“I love you more,” she replied, sobbing quietly.

He fought for more time. “I don’t... want to... go.”

“It’s all right, love. I know you’ve got to go now. Go where there’s no more pain. Go and wait for me there. It’ll not seem long to you, but it’ll feel like a lifetime to me.” Her hands shook as she brought his fingertips to her lips, for one more kiss. He could tell she did not want to say goodbye, but she was trying to be strong, for his sake.

“I’ll... wait, forever if... I have to,” he promised, with his last breath.

The angel of death had come for him, but she had not been the dark-winged reaper that he had been expecting. Instead, she had transformed into his beloved wife and gifted him one more moment with her, to say the farewell he had endured the last stretch of the voyage for. And as his heart gave out from the strain of his body’s dehydration, he rested in her arms, in the home where they had shared so much joy, with Nellie’s name forever resting on the frozen smile of his final moment on Earth.

THE END

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